Runaways and Renegades: Piracy in Colonial North Carolina

By Dr. Noeleen McIlvenna*

From *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 51:2 (spring 2012).

Images may differ from those in the original article.

North Carolina Essential Standards for Social Studies

- 4.H.1.3 Explain how people, events and developments brought about changes to communities in various regions of North Carolina
- 8.H.3.1 Explain how migration and immigration contributed to the development of North Carolina…
- 8.G.1.3 Explain how human and environmental interaction affected quality of life and settlement patterns in North Carolina and the United States.

This engraving depicting the infamous pirate Blackbeard appeared in a 1736 book about highwaymen. *Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.*

Chased out of the Caribbean and Charles Town, South Carolina, in autumn 1718, the dreaded buccaneer Blackbeard and his fleet needed a safe haven. They found one in the friendly Outer Banks of North Carolina. But authorities hunting pirates knew where to find them.

South Carolina forces captured Stede Bonnet, another pirate leader, that September after a battle at the mouth of the Cape Fear River. They took him south to Charles Town. Bonnet would be tried and hanged. In November, Alexander Spotswood, royal governor of Virginia, sent the Royal Navy into North Carolina territory. The target: Blackbeard, who by then commanded 300 men. The navy killed the powerful pirate, along with half of the crew from one of his ships, in a battle near Ocracoke. With Blackbeard's head tied to a ship's mast as a signal of the government's determination to end piracy, the British sailors carried the remaining pirates to Virginia. A trial led to their execution.

Modern marine archaeologists continue to study the sunken remains of *Queen Anne's Revenge*, the flagship that Blackbeard had lost earlier in 1718. As they do, we might wonder about North Carolina's history with pirates. The fact that Blackbeard and Bonnet hoped to evade capture in the colony tells us something about the early nature of what we know as the Tar Heel State. Indentured servants and disgruntled farmers ran away from Virginia's cruel plantation world to carve out isolated farms along the creeks and inlets of Albemarle Sound. They became the first European settlers in what is now northeastern North Carolina, starting in the 1650s. Many pirates, too, had abandoned security for the dream of liberty. For decades, settlers of the Albemarle region happily offered buccaneers a hiding place.

How well does Cap'n Jack Sparrow—the character depicted in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie series—reflect the reality of life for Blackbeard and other colonial pirates? Sparrow's dreadlocks remind us that people of many races, languages, and cultures blended in the Caribbean. His treasured admiral's tricorn hat flagrantly disrespects the Royal Navy's authority, as well as England's rigid social class system of that time. The wooden legs and eye patches of his pirate crew were common results of a life at sea. Most real pirates had started out as sailors. That dangerous job offered little pay, food, or opportunity to move up the ranks.

The most well-known historian of Atlantic pirates, Marcus Rediker, has documented how "the pirate ship was democratic in an undemocratic age." Pirates chose their captain. The crew divided whatever spoils they captured. So, while life on a pirate ship was no pleasure cruise, it did allow men a chance at controlling their own destinies. These men (and very occasionally women) certainly were not charmers, however. They lived rough and violent lives; a pirate ship did not offer a bunk to the sensitive or peace-loving. Pirates always stood ready to fight, steal, and kill.

The British government itself sponsored piracy, which is defined as the seizure of a ship and its cargo, in the 1500s and early 1600s. Queen Elizabeth I encouraged her "privateer" ship captains to plunder Spanish vessels loaded with South American silver and gold. However, in the 1660s, King Charles II passed laws intended to bring him (and all future English kings) money from every trade transaction in every British colony. These Navigation Acts foisted ever-heavier customs duties (taxes on trade goods) onto the colonial population. They also provoked an era of smuggling. Colonial merchants and their customers did not want to pay what they viewed as an extra tax on much-needed imported supplies. British ships that sailed the Atlantic Ocean, heavy with valuable cargoes of guns, cloth, and sugar, became targets rather than predators. Historians call the period from 1685 until 1720 the Golden Age of Piracy. Attempts to tighten the enforcement of customs collection met with more and more resistance.

Throughout the earliest history of settlement in North Carolina, poor farmers' fortunes were tightly linked with Boston traders who helped them avoid paying customs by smuggling. (This meant hiding goods from government officials trying to collect taxes.) The illegal trade left few records, of course. No one would document such forbidden business in writing. Historians mainly learn about the activity from the fury shown by authorities who did leave behind paperwork. When officials cracked down on smuggling, it should be no surprise that the

farmers of Albemarle formed new friendships. They turned to even more aggressive customs-evaders: pirates. A British customs official summed up the colony in 1701 with one angry sentence: "'Tis a place which receives pirates, runaways, and illegal traders."

Although pirates' chief hunting grounds became the Caribbean Sea, North Carolina's Outer Banks (and their treacherous geography) provided a safe hiding place from the Royal Navy. The people of Albemarle had political and economic motives for their friendly relationships with buccaneers. The region had always stood as a place of shelter for those most oppressed by owners or masters in England or Virginia. Runaways of many backgrounds—including slaves and indentured servants, along with small farmers and traders—pushed through the water-logged wilderness of the Great Dismal Swamp. They wanted to escape the few powerful planters who controlled society in colonial Virginia. One Virginia governor described northern Carolina as "the refuge of our renegades." Few moral or ethical dilemmas worried these Albemarle settlers when dealing with men and women prepared to steal from rich merchants or the royal bank account. What others called lawlessness, Carolina's early colonists considered freedom. This included freedom from burdensome taxes set by an oppressive government (in which they had no say) across the ocean. Politically, many sympathized with pirates.

There were practical considerations, too. Small tobacco farmers enjoyed little margin of profit. They could least afford the burden of customs. Some must have been grateful for whatever hard currency pirates brought to their economy. Coins of any nation rarely circulated outside of the large port cities. Even some government leaders could overlook their moral scruples. Governor Charles Eden (for whom Edenton is named) was accused of providing storage space for Blackbeard's loot, likely for a cut of the takings. Blackbeard may have spent the early summer of 1718 in Bath, openly living with his latest wife.

While English authorities did their best to combat piracy, they proved helpless at first. Gradually, they devoted more resources to the mission. The great planters of Virginia and South Carolina helped British authorities impose order. They feared the message of freedom that pirates carried to enslaved laborers and indentured servants. And so the governors of those colonies chased down pirates in the Outer Banks. With the execution of Blackbeard, the Golden Age of Piracy in the region ended. But the North Carolina spirit of rebellion against the British government was not completely squelched. Later in the century, the hunger for freedom would grow again.

**At the time of this article's publication, Dr. Noeleen McIlvenna served as associate professor of history at Wright State University. She is the author of* A Very Mutinous People: The Struggle for North Carolina, 1660–1713 *and a previous contributor to* Tar Heel Junior Historian*. McIlvenna studied colonial American history at Duke University.*